



'Really damn sexist': a discourse analysis of the language used to portray gender inequality within reality television

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ABSTRACT

This study used qualitative techniques to discover whether reality television programmes within the United Kingdom were portraying gender inequality. The process involved studying the content of the three most viewed episodes of the three most popular reality shows in the United Kingdom; Made in Chelsea, The Only Way is Essex, and Geordie Shore. A discourse analysis was used to explore the language within the episodes to gather an understanding as to how gender stereotypes are constructed and portrayed in reality shows. From this, two themes were recognised: differences in the portrayal of emotions between males and females, and the objectification of females. These themes were discussed in reference to Social Learning Theory and Social Construction Theory.

KEY WORDS:	QUALITATIVE STUDY	DISCOURSE ANALYSIS	GENDER INEQUALITY	REALITY TV	SUBTLE SEXISM
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Introduction

The objective of this research project is to explore a specific form of media, in order to establish the degree to which gender inequality may be being portrayed to media consumers, and apply psychological theories to determine why this may be detrimental to society. This will be examined through an increasingly popular type of television show known as 'scripted reality TV' (Moorti and Ross, 2004); a genre of television that claims to depict the real, everyday lives of different groups of young people in the United Kingdom, to the on looking public. A Discourse Analysis of the most popular three reality shows in the United Kingdom, according to OnePoll (2014), was used, applying Social Learning Theory and Social Construction Theory throughout the analysis.

Social Learning Theory (SLT) uses principles of conditioning and reinforcement; Albert Bandura (1977) propounded modern SLT, contrasting traditional forms on learning theory (Hargreaves, 1986). Using this, Bandura attempted to explain how behaviour is learnt through the process of observational learning from the environment. His famous Bobo doll experiment demonstrates that children will imitate the behaviour they observe. Bandura suggests that this experiment is an example of children observing and imitating 'models' in everyday life. From parents, to teachers, to the TV they watch; all of these models are providing behaviour that the children can process and copy, such as masculine and feminine traits, and pro and anti-social behaviour (Peterson and Hyde, 2010). Bandura explains that children will encode the behaviour of these models, eventually imitating their behaviour.

The behaviour shown in television programmes, such a reality shows, can have a direct implication on the behaviour of those watching, potentially leading to a general acceptance of certain behaviour (Galdi et al, 2013) such as the acceptance and normality of gender stereotyping and inequality. Further research from Kimmel (2008) supports this theory in suggesting that society's consumers of the media are passive and are uncritical of the messages fed to them.

A second theory that can be applied to the topic of gender within the media is that of Social Constructionism. This theory suggests that everyone holds an ideal version of gender as a result of cultural traditions, and language and discussion among people (Chong, 2005). The Social Construction Theory lends the idea that everything in society today is made up by the label and worth that has been assigned to it; a construct by society. Thus, the social norm of how a male or female should behave, look, and communicate, is all a product of how society has constructed it to be. Connell (1987) determines masculinities and femininities as social norms that are constructed and reconstructed through interaction.

In applying these theories, this research aims to determine the presence and magnitude of gender inequality and investigate why it is still so prominent in the media today.

Subtle sexism is the unequal and unfair treatment of women that is not generally recognised due to it being perceived as normative, and therefore does not appear unusual (Swim et al. 2004). Sexist language is an example of subtle sexism; it consists

of words, phrases and expressions that reinforce and perpetuate gender stereotypes (Crawford, 2001; Gay, 1997; Maass & Arcuri, 1996; Parks and Roberton, 2004). Sexist language can sometimes be blatant and universally rejected. On the other hand, it can often be more subtle and socially acceptable (Chew and Kelley-Chew, 2007). There are a variety of reasons people may use sexist language; some do so simply because they lack knowledge about what sexist language consists of, some may believe such language is not actually sexist, and others use sexist language to reinforce and maintain social hierarchies (Rucher, 2001). Miller and Smith (1980:19) stated that:

Because scientists have traditionally “translated” the Latin term *Homo sapiens* as “man” rather than “human being,” resistance to giving up this once-generic term is particularly strong in the scientific community.

Although sexist language can be directed towards males, it has been established that its detrimental and disempowering impact typically applies to women (Parks and Roberton, 2004). The use of subtle sexism could have insidious impacts on its victims (Swim et al. 2003); therefore, it is an important area to understand. Bhutia (2010) conducted research on the presence of sexist language in the media through the use of The Pyramid of Eggregiousness; it was reported that many sexually offensive terms were being used in reference to women. The pyramid is a classification of sexist language and has three levels, 1) Just Plain Sexist, 2) Really Damn Sexist and 3) Severe Misogyny. Phrases such as PMS, ice queen, shrill and nagging were just some of the many terms that appeared to be ‘Really Damn Sexist’ when referring to a female. Additionally, Bhutia (2010) found that labelling a woman as ‘emotional’ was a further reoccurring term used in the media. Bhutia’s (2010) research explains that these terms may seem harmless, when in fact labelling a woman as emotional simply trivialises and diminishes her. Due to the social acceptance and normality of these phrases, they are not recognised as discriminatory (Chew and Kelley-Chew, 2007). In addition, research has shown that men typically perceive such language as less offensive than women (Van Oudenhoven et al. 2008), suggesting that men are less aware of the effects such language can have.

Researchers with the desire to change this subtly sexist language (Chew and Kelley-Chew, 2007; Swim et al. 2004) have aspired to replace false collective terms such as ‘mankind’ and ‘chairman’, hierarchic and separatist terms such as ‘major’ and ‘majorette’, and terms that deny adulthood, such as using the term ‘girl’ instead of ‘woman’, with inclusive expressions (Miller and Swift, 1988). The efforts by these language reformers have only been moderately successful, however their attempts to enforce change has encouraged and sparked a lively debate within the area (Parks and Roberton, 2005).

The media has conveyed an over-whelming diffusion of messages that stereotype and objectify women on television by portraying them as passive, dependent on men, compliant, and sexual objects (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Research has demonstrated how males exposed to objectifying media show a greater tendency to engage in sexual coercion, manifest more gender-harassing behaviour, and conform to masculine gender role norms (Galdi et al. 2013), demonstrating how media content can play a central role in activating harassment-related social norms, which in turn encourages harassing conduct (Galdi et al, 2013).

The media's sexually objecting portrayal of females has shown an association with the self-objectification in young women (Fardouly et al. 2015), which can lead to anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction, eating disorders, and an overall negative effect on the young women's well-being (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Moradi and Huang, 2008). This further identifies how imperative research in this area is.

It is important to recognise within this line of research that women's roles in the media have heightened; according to Lauzen (2015), compared to 39% in 1997 – 1998, females have made up 42% of speaking characters on broadcast television shows in 2014 – 2015, and within reality television specifically, females have made up 47% of characters overall in 2014 – 2015. This can be seen as a step in the right direction for gender equality within the media; however, whilst the representation of women in the media may be increasing, it is still critical to understand the manner in which they are being portrayed, and simultaneously avoid increasing negative depictions of women that may encourage stereotypical reinforcements to viewers (Collins, 2011).

The portrayal of gender in the media has been profusely researched; much of this research has concluded that females are very much sexualised; "...television programmes and films, most newspapers, and large numbers of magazines devote considerable attention to female thighs and breasts" (Hargreaves, 1986:201). It has further been suggested that great significance is attached to these certain psychical components (Hargreaves, 1986).

In this initial background research, Hargreaves (1986) shows that gender inequality is still very much present in the media. By applying SLT to these findings, it can be assumed that viewers of this form of media, the general public, may encode and imitate this sexualisation of females, as the theory suggests.

Thompson and Zerbinos (1997) produced a piece of research that attempted to look at the implications of the way in which gender is portrayed in television cartoons. They used structured interviews to gather information on how 4 to 9 year old children perceived the presentation of male and female cartoon characters. Their study involving 89 children found that the majority perceived the characters in a stereotypical way, i.e. males were active and violent, whilst females were domestic, paid a lot of time and attention to their appearance, and are interested in males. This piece of research by Thompson and Zerbinos (1997) lends support to the idea that gender stereotypes are in fact a product of social constructionism. Labels and ideals have been developed over time, through interaction, and generate expectations about how either gender is to behave. That is, females thinking about appearance and the opposite sex, whilst males display more dominant personality traits.

It is essential to understand why this topic may cause such an issue; with regards to the effects of media consumption, studies have been conducted to explore the influence of the media, one particular demonstration of a popular topic is that of 'body ideals'. Findings within these studies support the claim that exposure to thin-ideal body images depicted by the media is in fact related to an increase in body dissatisfaction in women (Bell and Dittmar, 2011; Grabe et al. 2008; Groesz, 2001).

Similarly, Pritchard and Cramblitt (2014) conducted research to explore the media's influence on the drive for thinness and muscularity. They hypothesised that the desire

for thinness and muscularity would directly relate to certain factors; media exposure, and magazine and television consumption. One further expectation of their research was that societal pressure, and the use of media as a source of information about the ideal body image, would connect the relation between media exposure and drive for thinness and drive for muscularity, in both genders. In keeping with SLT, these expectations are as this theory would suggest; that an individual will encode and mimic the behaviour of a model.

Pritchard and Cramblitt (2014) concluded that the media and the internalisation of body ideals do have an impact on the drive for thinness and drive for muscularity in both genders, supporting their initial expectations. The results produced by Pritchard and Cramblitt's (2014) research revealed that the use of media information on the ideal body image does in fact mediate the relationship between drive for thinness and media exposure in females. This provides strong support that the media does have a profound implication on the audience it is being delivered to, as SLT would suggest.

Through looking at gender within the media and the previous research that has been carried out, the general consensus, evidentially, seems to be that the two genders are still not being portrayed as equal through the media; according to Collins (2011) women are still being sexualised in the media by displaying them in provocative clothing. In addition, Collins (2011) claims that women are typically shown in feminine stereotypical roles, such as homemakers, wives and even sexual gatekeepers. Wallis (2011) found that females are portrayed as subordinate and males as aggressive through the media.

Linking these gender focused studies with that of Pritchard and Cramblitt (2014) and further research into media effects, it is clearly demonstrated that what is portrayed by the media does in fact have a direct implication on the viewer. Supplementary to this, Bhutia (2010) shows that sexually diminishing language is being used in the media. This highlights a clear gap for research to be carried out into the portrayal of gender, through the language used, within the media.

By applying Social Learning Theory and Social Construction Theory to the previous research that has been discussed, the source behind reinforcement of gender stereotypical behaviour seems evidently to be the mass media as a whole; however, with the media being such a large, broad medium it is hard to pin point as to where the problem truly stems from. Although there has been research conducted in specific sections within the media, little has been done within the new media of scripted reality television, more specifically, the language that is used within these shows and put forward to millions of viewers on a weekly basis as '*real*'. This study will therefore examine the construction of gender inequality through the language used in these reality television shows by using a Discourse Analysis.

Method

Design

For this study, a qualitative approach was applied; "... the methodological choice of qualitative research has been very important in that it allows for exploration of lives and institutions in their rich diversity and wholeness..." (Gergen, 2008:280).

Qualitative, compared to quantitative research, has become increasingly integrated into the mainstream in the last decade (Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2008). But, despite the increasing favourability, choosing a qualitative approach was not without its limitations; the researcher was instantly confined to using a smaller sample size, meaning the findings were not as generalizable as those produced through a quantitative approach. In addition, qualitative research leaves the analysis open to be influenced by the researcher's idiosyncrasies; 'Qualitative methods, such as discourse ... tend to be based on interpretation, rather than on such measurement' (Hesmondhalgh, 2006:120).

However, a much deeper understanding was established through using a qualitative approach. By analysing the language within reality television, contextual and situational effects could be used to understand the meanings within the text. By applying a qualitative approach, an in-depth analysis of the language used within reality television shows was obtained. The content of reality television episodes was transcribed (Appx. 3) and analysed to begin to understand what is happening within these types of programmes (Knoblauch and Schnettler, 2012), regarding conversing about gender. Recordings and videography allowed for rich recordings of social processes (Knoblauch, 2012; Potter, 2010) and therefore allowed for a deeper understanding within the analysis.

Consequently, this research took a qualitative approach in order to go beyond the surface of the media and explore, with a deeper understanding, the reason to why gender inequality is still such a prominent issue; Are reality shows reinforcing gender inequality through their language?

Selection and Collection of Data

Data was collected from the three most popular 'scripted reality' television programmes according to OnePoll (2014); Made in Chelsea (MIC), The Only Way is Essex (TOWIE), and Geordie Shore (GS) (Appx. 2). These were obtained through BoB National; a website with videos, clips, and episodes for the academic use of students, and Sky; a television broadcaster with programmes available to be viewed.

In the process of selecting episodes, in order to establish an overall view of each series, it was decided that the three most viewed episodes of each series would be selected to gather an overall representation, giving a total of nine episodes to analyse. To obtain such figures proved difficult as the majority of sites with this information were behind paywalls and required a subscription to gain this information. As a result, Wikipedia was used as the source for viewing figures.

Ethical Considerations

According to The British Psychological Society (2009), there are four primary ethical principles; Respect, Competence, Responsibility and Integrity.

As this research does not involve any interaction with participants, nor is it gathering data from participants, the ethical issue of 'respect' is not applicable. Therefore meaning that informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, deception, participant

privacy, protection of participants and avoiding cheating, as categorised by Kellenhear (1993), are not ethical issues raised by this research.

Regarding 'competence', the researcher recognises that ethical issues are subject to arise within the process of gathering data and throughout the research as a whole. However, if and when such issues arise, they will be dealt with accordingly and in line with the ethical guidelines.

'Responsibility' within the ethical guidelines is also an issue that was not applicable to this line of research; as this was unobtrusive research, harm to the participant, continuity of care, protection of participants, and debriefing are all issues that were not be applicable to this research.

Finally, 'Integrity'. This final guideline was followed by ensuring that the researcher carried out the research to the highest standard of honesty and accuracy possible. The analysis that was used and any conclusions that were made were done so whilst conveying professionalism. With the above in mind, any ethical misconduct that may have risen through the length of the research was challenged and dealt with professionally and appropriately.

It has been explained how and why this research is an important and relevant issue to be studied, whilst drawing on and learning from established theories and previous research. In addition, time constraints have been considered. With this in mind, a sample of nine episodes were used in order to obtain the most amount of data whilst analysing and using that data to the best of ability within the time frame.

A main ethical consideration for this study is the copyright of the existing media that will be analysed. According to GOV.UK (2014) the use of small extracts for educational and non-commercial research purposes is acceptable and not against the copyright law. Therefore, using small extracts of text from a select few episodes of each series of reality TV for a discourse analysis will be in line with the copyright law.

Data Analysis Methods

When exploring the issue of gender portrayal, stereotypes, and inequality, studies have been conducted with a broad overlook of one or more mediums within the media, many of which provide the conclusion that gender inequality is still very much an issue in today's media (Herd, 2014; Trolan, 2013). Whilst this is apparent, further research should be conducted to explore what and why it is still present in today's modern times (Collins, 2011). This shows a clear gap in research, and is what this specific work aimed to explore. This research took a more specific, in depth, qualitative approach in order to potentially narrow down one area of the media, from which such a broad issue may be reinforced from.

For this research, a qualitative approach with a discourse analysis was seen as the best approach to implement for the type of information that was required for this study. Other types of analysis for research of the media have been carried out but have '...neglected the specifically linguistic ways in which such media as film and television convey meaning...' (Hesmondhalgh. 2006:120). There are many forms of analysis that have been used to analyse media content in different ways; context, language,

scenery, imagery, and so on (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). This study looked specifically at the language used within the transcripts from the programmes, in line with this, Discourse Analysis was fundamentally the best approach for this line of research (Talbot, 2007; Van Dijk, 1985).

Discourse analysis is a form of analysis that can be used for the qualitative research of different contextual mediums. However, by concentrating solely on the language used within reality television programmes in this research, a detailed account of how gender is portrayed was obtained. To fully grasp an understanding of how gender is being portrayed in these so called 'real' interactions, detail and discussion has been used (Hesmondhalgh, 2006).

The discourse analysis that was applied took an interactionist perspective; Schwalbe et al. (2000) claims that by using an interactionist approach it creates the ability to probe, more deeply, the processes and themes recognised by a standard analysis. This research is explicitly looking at the detail in the language used within social interaction within reality television shows. This perspective of discourse analysis is not interested in forming and understanding links between broader social and cultural processes and formation (Eskandarjouy, 2014), but rather looking specifically at the detail within the text, in this case, the detail of how gender is discussed.

The focus, when using an interactionist perspective, is on how social alignment is produced through communication. It is purely concentrated on the analysis of the action orientation of text and talk in social interaction. Drawing on conversation analysis and ethno methodology throughout process. Within this form of analysis, the conversations were analysed as manifestations of a world that is created by oneself (Eskandarjouy, 2014).

In order to reach the desired results, the selection process, as discussed, was conducted. Each of the nine episodes were then individually transcribed. The language within those transcripts was then analysed and discussed, both on an individual basis and in comparison to one another.

By applying an interactionist perspective to the discourse analysis, the researcher has therefore only used explanation and understanding that was thematised by the transcripts themselves. To do this, once the episodes had been transcribed the researcher read through each one individually, highlighting any form of language that related to gender, looking more specifically at the way in which gender is spoken about; for example, how each gender may talk about the other, is it in a positive or negative manner? Is there an obvious difference in the way either gender communicates about the different sexes? Is there an apparent feminine/masculine theme? In addition, specific language that was recognised to appear in more than one of the series was highlighted.

Through a second analysis, the researcher then categorised the highlighted areas into colour coded sections such as 'female showing emotion', 'male showing emotion', 'objectifying language', 'reference to female's body', 'stereotyping', 'immature portrayal of males' and 'power-play'. The most occurring and relevant of these categories were selected. Necessary quotes were extracted from the transcripts and

applied to the discussion, drawing on relevant, established theories and previous research to support the analysis that was made.

Analysis & Discussion

Discourse analysis allows for a wide exploration and focus on human interaction (Potter, 2010), such as the conversations heard throughout reality television shows. Other research has shown that discourse analysis is a contribution to the study of language (Van Dijk, 1985). Using this research, it was an important aim to acknowledge and consider the interactions between genders throughout the discourse studied (Hesmondhalgh, 2006), in order to establish whether reality television contributes to the social construction of gender inequality.

Through analysing the language in this study, two main themes were commonly noted throughout the nine episodes; portrayal of emotions in both genders and objectification of females. These themes will be analysed and discussed.

Theme 1: Portrayal of emotions

Throughout the data collected, the difference in the portrayal of emotions between males and females was recognised as a continuous theme. Within this theme, it was analysed that there was an apparent difference in the way emotion was displayed by either gender. Whilst female's emotions were often the main topic of conversation; displaying 72 conversations referring to a female being upset, crying, and generally emotional. The mention of a male's emotion was only shown 18 times throughout all episodes transcribed. In line with this, an example of when reality television has contributed to socially constructed gender norms (Connell 1987) can be recognised when the topic of a male's emotions arose in conversation; it was found that an explanation for such feelings was closely followed;

Mario: The thing is I know I'll get loads of stick for the whole Lucy thing, I'm a bit of a mug, that's what fucks me off because through being a good boyfriend and standing by her, I'm now deemed the prick. (TOWIE, Episode (E) 1)

Within this quote, a male is shown to be reasoning his negative emotions; he explains that he is only portraying such feelings because his reputation may be damaged. Thus, it could be argued the male is shown to feel obliged to explain his emotion. This theme continues through further dialogue;

Samantha: I think this is so fresh, it's just happened. He's a man, he just needs time, do you know what I mean? Any man would need time after this. For him, it's a pride thing... (TOWIE, E1)

This quote demonstrates a female reasoning a male's emotional state with labelling it "a pride thing", suggesting that the male is only upset and showing emotion because his pride has been hurt. Similarly, further extracts show an additional example of a male justifying his negative emotions with the concern of how it will make him look to others;

Binky: He was just like, "I just really am finding it really hurtful and upsetting that people are saying this, it's making me feel and look really bad when actually I haven't and wouldn't do anything to you like that"... (MIC, E2)

Once again, this extract appears to suggest that the man justifies his use of emotion as a result of his concern for the way his seemingly negative appearance and behaviours are viewed by his peers.

Throughout the transcribed episodes it was analysed that males were not often shown to portray emotions; yet when they did, it seemed to be excused by the fact they were simply worried that their appearance and pride would be affected. Through this medium of reality television, it could be suggested that when a male explores his emotions, doing so could consequentially affect the man's masculinity (Flynn et al. 2010). Thus it could be argued that reality television is enforcing socially acceptable gender norms (Galdi, 2013).

In comparison to reality show's portrayal of male emotions, language that was used to describe a female's emotion showed to be much more irrational than that of males;

Charlotte: I will always have her back; until she starts acting like a lunatic like this and then what can you say? (GS, E1)

Spencer: I had a mare, mate. Binky basically lost it on me... (MIC1, E1)

Lucy: She went mental ... Got up, stormed out. Haven't spoken to her since, she's just so angry. (MIC, E1)

To continue with Bhutia's (2010) theory on subtle sexism, the language used in these extracts to describe a female's emotions are a perfect example of the 'severely misogynistic' classification of sexist language as the examples are entirely derogatory. Language such as 'lunatic', 'losing it' and 'going mental' only trivialise a woman's emotions resulting in them not to be taken seriously (Swim et al, 2004). It could also be argued that these transcript extracts are prime examples of the way women's emotions are subjected to the stigmatisation of poor mental health, when men's emotions are not. These findings of comparisons to poor mental health were entirely unexpected and further emphasise the subtle sexism displayed against females. Research from Crocker and Major (1989) show that women as a 'category' have been subjected to stigmas like these for more than three decades, along with diverse groups such as black people, unattractive persons and facially deformed persons in particular, to name a few. From this research it is suggested that there is an inequality in the way these reality television shows advocate the emotions attributed to each gender, which can have a long lasting effect on the social construction of gender inequality (Galdi et al, 2013).

However, in comparison, male's emotions were described using words that generally gave a much more sympathetic nature;

Carol: I think Mark's just in an emotional state at the moment over it all... (TOWIE, E2)

This initial theme has shown how reality television is portraying male and female emotions in different ways. Women are often shown as emotional characters, and the description of their emotion is continuously referred to that of mental health issues. Whereas males are portrayed as showing limited emotion. This, in its simplest form, shows an inequality in the way both genders are portrayed through reality television.

Theme 2. Objectification of females

Within the transcripts the theme of objectifying language was selected as the second most prominent theme to appear throughout all of the discourse analysed. This included popular terms used to refer to both genders, and sexualising quotes that objectified the females in the episodes.

Firstly, it was recognised that a reoccurring theme throughout each of the reality shows was males using the term 'bird' when referring to females;

Spencer: I mean, why anyone pretends to care about the clothes, it's a joke. I mean, obviously it's all about the birds. (MIC, E2)

Kyle: I'm having such a good time with the lads, and instead of necking on with one bird, I'm necking on with two birds. (GS, E1)

Arg: What about, what if you want to take a bird up there? What do they think? (TOWIE, E1)

Within these episodes, 'bird' is portrayed as a common term used by males when referring to a female. However, when compared to popular terms that were used to refer to males, the difference in the two genders becomes even more prominent;

Holly: The thought of even kissing another lad right now is making us feel sick. (GS, E2)

Binky: Well you guys need to find outfits for the boys for Cheska's drinks... (MIC, E3)

Lauren: Yeah because it's a good thing, I think, because that's being strong, do you know what I mean? You don't need Kirk, I don't need Mark. I think we're a lot stronger than boys... (TOWIE, E2)

Through these quotes, it is demonstrated how males are referred to in more general terms such as 'lads' and 'boys', whilst females are referred to as 'birds'; in many respects, a small, vulnerable animal, which can sometimes be kept as a pet. The implications of this association leads to the general acceptance and normalisation of males pursuing females for their own amusement. In keeping with Wallis' (2011) work, this further demonstrates how females in the media are being portrayed as subordinate beings, whilst males are portrayed as aggressive. Through likening a woman to an animal, the connotation is seen to be that the male has control over the female, reinforcing the idea that males are the controlling gender. However, in line with Chew and Kelley-Chew (2007), these terms were not seen to be used in an attempt to cause offense, and at no point was a female shown to react negatively to being

referred to in such way; in fact, females in the episodes were occasionally seen to refer to themselves as birds;

Sophie: He's probably bird watching (MIC, E2)

A female referring to a male as “bird watching” implies a level of self-objectification (Fardouly et al. 2015) by the female. Supporting the idea that the effects of being exposed to objectifying language leads to self-objectification. Additionally, by showing a female also using the term ‘bird’ to refer to other females, it gives the notion that such language is acceptable, demonstrating to viewing females that these kind of terms are normal to be referred to and as uncritical consumers, today’s culture does not question whether this should be acceptable or not (Kimmel, 2008). Instead of questioning the media presented, such as these reality television shows, consumers are learning from it and as Bandura (1977) suggests, individuals are susceptible to mimicking the behaviour displayed. Additionally this could suggest to the male viewers that women don’t mind being referred to in this objectifying way; leading to further misunderstanding of the effects of objectivity (Van Oudenhoven, 2008).

Furthermore, throughout the transcribed episodes, specific quotes appeared within the text that demonstrated a level of sexualisation towards females. These were more apparent within TOWIE and GS;

Chantelle: I'm your new member of the house. (GS, E3)

Aaron: Now that Marnie has left the house, Chantelle, you're exactly what I need. (GS, E3)

When analysed, it was construed that this quote demonstrates a male suggesting that the presence of a female is for his own benefit and needs.

Scott: Fucking fresh fanny (GS, E3)

This supports the theme of female objectification, thus continuing with the theme of constructing the reinforcement of gender inequality through reality television.

Georgio: [addressing Gemma] Well, I suppose your saving grace [is], if you do have a crash, you've got a nice couple of airbags there, haven't you? So you should be pretty safe. (TOWIE, E1)

Here, a male is referring to a female’s breasts as “a nice couple of airbags”. The comparison of airbags to breasts is an additional example of female objectification; by referring to breasts as a useful car part, it is suggesting that a woman’s body is there to be used for a purpose, more specifically a sexual purpose (Fredrikson & Roberts, 1997). The likening of breasts to an object further continues within the transcripts:

Dino: She's got a bit of a treasure chest on her... (TOWIE, E2)

It is noted here that a woman’s pair of breasts are being referred to as a treasure chest, an item that is often seen to be sought after; something to be treasured. Again, a woman’s body is being shown as something to be chased, a goal at the end of the game. The objectifying quotes continued in GS;

Scott: Tonight has been absolutely wicked, but it's time to take these two birds home and rattle them all over the shop. (GS, E1)

Scott: Right, it's my turn in the shag pad, but before I flip this bird over, I'm flipping this fucking mattress... (GS, E1)

This quote sees a male talking about a female and suggesting he is going to “rattle them all over the shop”, the use of the word “rattle” and “shop” suggests that the female is a toy to be played with by the male. The male further continues to refer to the woman as a “bird” he is going to “flip over”, suggesting that the woman is a sexual object that will be compliant with a male’s actions (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). This, in turn, reinforces the idea that the male has psychical control over the female.

These quotes demonstrate the level of objectifying language that is being used within reality television shows. The effects of such objectifying language has been associated with engagement in sexual coercion, conformity to masculine gender role norms, and harassing conduct (Galdi et al. 2013). By portraying objectifying language through reality television shows, the media is consequently reinforcing these effects. This can be used to recognise that this form of media is demonstrating and perpetuating gender inequality.

Concluding remarks

This study was designed to explore the effect that reality television shows had on the social construction of gender through the use of Discourse Analysis. From studying three of the most popular national reality television shows, it can be argued that the findings imply a clear and distinct argument for the proposed social construction of gender and further still has explored the inequality amongst gender.

Through a discursive analysis of the language used in reality television shows it is to be stated that researcher’s interpretation was implemented. Therefore, a limitation of this study would be that the findings may not be replicated as the analysis was purely based on the researcher’s interpretations. Furthermore, the nature of the research limited the sample of episodes to a maximum of three from each series; whilst the most popular episodes of each series was selected to try and obtain a true representation of each series, the limited sample size reduces the generalisability of the analysis made. It could also be argued that using reality television that originates from one country alone is a further restriction and these findings could not be considered outside of the United Kingdom. Different dialects and languages could be considered to withhold different meanings and could consequently affect international interpretation.

Whilst this research demonstrates that there is in fact a theme of gender construction and inequality being portrayed through reality television shows from the United Kingdom, future research should be conducted to assess whether this is happening internationally by observing shows from other countries; gender inequality is not cultural, it’s universal (Betron, 2015).

This research has shown how reality television shows are displaying a gender inequality through the language used. Reality shows are increasing in popularity (Moorti and Ross, 2004). Therefore gender inequality will be portrayed more and more through the media as this medium expands. The fight for gender equality is not over.

Reflexive analysis

Reflexive analysis is considered an essential understanding of both the phenomenon within the study, and the research process itself (Watt, 2007). The use of reflexive analysis is imperative as a young, new researcher, as Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggests; it is a vital means in order to progress and enable continuously working and becoming a better researcher.

My epistemological stance within this research greatly influenced my methodological process. Conducting research into the social construction of gender inequality allowed my beliefs and assumptions to be incorporated and acknowledged, and therefore greatly influenced my qualitative approach.

In selecting my research project, I chose to focus on the topic of gender inequality as it has interested me for many years now. Growing up, it seemed to me that society claimed that social exclusion and the discrimination of 'categories' were very much in the past. However, I couldn't understand why, if this were true, the media were still portraying such blatant differences in gender. This is where my interest in the area began to grow.

On reflection, my stance in this research as a female may have contributed to the analysis that was drawn. I understand that this may have affected the way I read the situations and conversations within the episodes that were analysed, and such analysis may not have been drawn on if a male had conducted similar research. Additionally, reality television shows are a popular medium within my age group, therefore I did have a predisposed idea of what each episode would involve, having prior knowledge of the three series. However, I do not watch the series myself. This in turn, could have influenced my opinion further on what was being portrayed. With an initial dislike for the programmes, my pre-judged opinion could have had an influence on what and how I analysed the content.

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